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What Does Young South Asia Want? Can Chetan Bhagat, Mohsin Hamid, and Arundhati Roy tell us?

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Abstract

Chetan Bhagat, Mohsin Hamid, and Arundhati Roy join the ranks of south Asian novelists who also write political essays. They address various factions in society, but share a common disgust with institutional corruption and political maneuvering, and manipulation of the powerless. While attacking defensive posturing and aggressive venality, they argue for a nation that finds its strength in pluralism and that embraces the poor.

Keywords: Bhagat, Hamid, Roy, venality, pluralism.

In the 70 years since independence and partition, South Asia has produced many writers with theories to structure public understanding of what national identities now mean. Such writers, whether working in the subcontinent or abroad in the diaspora, struggle to imagine what a “postcolonial” condition means, and whether the use of such a term implicitly continues the hermeneutics that came along with the British. As part of that conversation, some contemporary writers seek other frames of reference, like globalization, to break free from the baggage of history. In its 2017 conference in Philadelphia, for example, the South Asian Literary Association suggested that the subcontinent is “now marked in some ways by neoliberal globalization and shifting diasporic and transnational flows” (taken from its call for papers), thus signaling that these “flows” blur the notion of nation itself. In this essay I would like to suggest one arguably less academic site where one might find an intersection of the transnational and the diasporic with a discourse trying to redefine the subcontinent on, as it were, its “own” terms -- that is, terms not only set by western literary theorists, or powerfully ensconced social scientists like the Subaltern Studies Group within the subcontinent and dispersed across the globe.

One place to look would be writers of fiction who also venture into political writing. In 2008, novelist Amit Chaudhuri published *Clearing a Space*, a collection of his essays from various literary journals.

In an interview with Salil Tripathi in the year before its publication he records the direction he would be trying to take in the collected essays: "I am trying to clear the space for a discussion of Indian culture in the context of modernity, as distinct from the post-colonial discourse. This is not a post-colonial response to the Empire, but a 150-year story of self-division and creative tension." The implication seems to be a reference to an internal discussion within an extended family, rather than an extended argument with one's landlord.

We saw indications of the complexities of this conscious self-fashioning and positioning in the global community, for example, in Amitav Ghosh's disinterest in being considered for the Commonwealth Writers' prize some years ago. This seemed straight-forward enough: India is no longer defined by Britain, is no longer to be forever referring back to those years in which the colonizer set forth in political and economic terms habits of memory whereby south Asians would be "post" anything. But at the same time, Ghosh coupled his dismissal of a "Commonwealth" award for writing to his resistance to withdrawing from the lucrative Dan David prize. The first, he said, perpetuated the colonial vision, whereas the latter was "awarded by a university in conjunction with a private foundation" (Chowdhury) and not by the state of Israel. Some may have found the distinction unconvincing, but such disagreements indicate the ferment in which India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and the rest of south Asia still finds itself, continuing to ponder national identities and widely-held values.

The roles the younger generations will assume in answering these questions is obviously of great importance, since 60 percent of the world's youth (i.e., 750 million people between the ages of 15 and 24) live in the Asia-Pacific region; in 2010 India had 234 million people of similar age (19% of the country's population) and the youth of similar age in Bangladesh was 20 percent of that country's population.¹ Who is speaking for, and to, this next generation of South Asians, who will fashion this 'post-postcolonial' world?

Beyond their popular novels, recent essay collections from Chetan Bhagat, Mohsin Hamid, and Arundhati Roy are case studies of South Asians carrying out the negotiations that, in retrospect, may come to be seen as blueprints for the "new" south Asia that is now coming into being. The three writers clearly have different political agendas and interests, and differing

suggestions for national improvements. But they share certain emphases, and first among these is their virulent condemnation of institutional corruption and political maneuvering.

In two collections of essays entitled *What Young India Wants* (2012) and *Making India Awesome* (2015) Chetan Bhagat sounds very postcolonial, indeed, noting that “kings and colonizers left our country nearly seven decades ago. It is time they left our minds” (Making, 33). His appears to be a populist version of Kenyan novelist Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s frequent calls for the *decolonization* of African minds (1986) -- though Ngugi’s call is more immediately controversial, focusing with great power on the languages in which formerly colonized peoples choose to write, going forward after independence. Ngugi, after all, dedicates his book “to all those who write in African languages, and to all those who over the years have maintained the dignity of the literature, culture, philosophy, and other treasures carried by African languages,” but on this point, as indeed on many others, Bhagat is no ideological purist: he is a pragmatist. He begins one essay with a warning that “China may soon have more English speakers than India” (WYIW, 114) and concludes it by stating that “English is not competing with the vernacular. . . . Hindi is your mother, English is your wife and it is possible to love both at the same time”(117-118). Bhagat knows his audience: hip young students who want to become cosmopolitan businessmen. As he sees it, using the master’s tools to one’s own advantage simply makes good sense: “As a developing nation, English is one of the few tools available to make Indians take their rightful place in the world. Let’s make sure we keep it sharp and share it wide”(118).ⁱⁱIn global exchanges, he is arguing, a *lingua franca* such as English has become, serves the nation well—especially, perhaps, in a nation with so many officially recognized languages.

Taking another tack, Mohsin Hamid in the essays he collects in *Discontent and Its Civilizations* (2015) is much more “writerly,” watching himself as he composes, reflecting on how that very act shapes not only his sentences, but also his sense of purpose. He says of himself that “I am becoming a different person. . . inventing myself as I go along, as I suspect we all are” (3)—inventing himself, inventing “ourselves,” and thus, by stint of who we as his chosen readers self-select ourselves to be, inventing a particular subset of the nation. As might be

expected from an author who ironically titles a novel, *How to Grow Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, Hamid takes a skeptical view of simplistic tribal and selfish recipes for dubious social improvement and ultimately short-sighted personal enrichment. One might wonder, for example, what he might think of the mercantile aspirations of the many readers Chetan Bhagat successfully addresses. Hamid noted the 60th anniversary of his nation of Pakistan and wrote that “my wish for our national anniversary is this: that we finally take the knife we have turned too often upon ourselves and place it firmly in its sheath” (135).ⁱⁱⁱ

In *The End of Imagination* (2016), a collection of essays written between 1998 and 2004, Arundhati Roy—who surely elicits the strongest response from readers, both pro and con—is the most lacerating of the three, complaining that “We *need* to feel like victims. We need to feel beleaguered. We need enemies. We have so little sense of ourselves as a nation and therefore constantly cast about for targets to define ourselves against. . . . If we are looking for a way out, we need some honest answers to some uncomfortable questions” (57). As with Bhagat and Hamid, Roy does not mollicoddle her readers.

It is instructive that three such varying authors are strong in criticizing their audiences (plural, because they are not addressing the same readers) for self-pity and defensive posturing, and it is a useful exercise to imagine the ideal reader implied by each of the three.^{iv} Bhagat is published by Rupa Press in New Delhi and these two collections are made up from columns originally appearing in English and Hindi leading newspapers. Indeed, though the *New York Times* called him the biggest-selling English-language novelist in India’s history and *Time* magazine named him one of the 100 most influential people in the world, Bhagat is hardly known in the United States, except among diasporic south Asians. Hamid is published by Random House in New York and Hamish Hamilton in the United Kingdom; all but three of his essays gathered here originally appeared in the west. Roy is published by Haymarket Books in the United States, and her book’s essays were originally published or read in various spots in India, the U.S., the U.K., and Brazil. Hamid and Roy are quite well known in the west and have a global audience. These three are not addressing the same elements of society, and this demonstrates the complexity of the social divisions that make up the nations of south Asia.

On this point, Chetan Bhagat is straightforward: His style is light and doggedly optimistic, and he clearly seeks to appeal to a general readership. He is writing for Indians—but not *all* Indians; as we shall see, he really wishes to be read by the small majority of Indians who are willing to change their society rather than those who are complicit in its comfortable structural imbalances. He dedicates his second collection to “the awesome youth of India,” and both books were published by Rupa Publications in New Delhi. Mohsin Hamid, on the other hand, seems to have chosen a Western audience, no doubt including non-resident South Asians, since all but two of the 36 essays were originally published in the United States, Germany, or the UK. As with his *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, *How to Grow Filthy Rich*, and *Exit West*, his style is with-it, as if he and the reader have been friends for a while and they are having a conversation over a coffee. He imagines his ideal reader to be worldly, educated, probably not an academic—though he shows enough formal experimentation with genre to draw the professorial crowd, as well. Arundhati Roy draws an international readership of movers and shakers: of the 22 essays in this collection, one was presented in Brazil, two were published in the UK, seven in the United States, and 12 in India. She is aiming for a highly-educated audience, many of whom would be in academic jobs or positions of leadership, and her essays are generally chockful of statistics and renditions of historical events that would be relatively familiar to Indian readers, but only slightly known by many non-south-Asians. Her tone is dismissive of those who disagree with her presentation and interpretation of events, and thus her writings are the most polemical. All three raise several common questions, but each goes his or her own way in analysis or in recommendations, and their emphases and passions have quite different tones. The issues dear to their hearts tell us as much about the issues of concern to their varying constituencies as it tells us about the authors. While hardly sparing their criticism of the world outside south Asia, they insist that blaming others is no longer helpful and they agree that endemic corruption is high on the list of items that must be dealt with.

Before he became a writer, Bhagat worked in the ratings advisory department at Goldman Sachs in Hong Kong. He decided to give up that certain career when he took responsibility for the future of his nation. Before that, he writes,

I became the typical armchair NRI advisor. Whenever I heard about bad policies created by Indian politicians, I became depressed. Every time there was news about communal or regional violence, I was in pain. ‘What the hell were we doing?’ I used to ask at NRI parties. ‘The finance minister of Malaysia went to meet Intel and lobbied for a chip plant near Kuala Lumpur. Our politicians fought with each other or planned scams!’ (WYIW, xiv)

In response, he was advised to focus on himself and stay out of hopeless India. But he saw signs of hope. He found 80% of Indian youth were self-focused and indifferent; of the remaining 20%, 80% were permanently committed to a political side based on a personality—the ‘Modi-bhakt’ and the ‘AAPtards,’ as he puts it (MIA, 2). But the remaining 20% of that 20%, the 4% of Indian youth, are what he describes as caring and objective, and these are the readers he hopes to inspire to change their nation. It comes as no surprise that he finds in himself their embrace of neutrality, and sees it as his greatest strength in countering national cynicism (WYIW, xxiv). So, though Bhagat is, of these three authors, arguably the one most focused on youth, even he aims for just 4% of them!

Writing of Pakistan, Mohsin Hamid argues for “a position that dispenses with the illusion that equality can be enhanced in a society prostrate before either its rich or its clerics. . . . We might,” he writes,

[s]hift from disputes over blasphemy laws to actually delivering due process of law, from arguments over curbing radical madrassas to actually building a high-quality state education system, from alternately buying off and fighting tribal chieftains to actually empowering local tribes-people. (160).

Implicit in this view is an irritation with patriarchy, an impatience for a more democratic voice for those in Pakistani society kept in their place by norms that enable the reinscription of long-outdated customs and laws favoring wealthy men and privileged clerics.

Roy is the most scathing on this topic of intransigent privilege, and it is her *donnée* undergirding attacks on any particular political mess. “What do you do if you’re trapped in an asylum and the doctors are all dangerously deranged” (47), she asks, regarding the nationalist argument for India’s testing of the nuclear bomb. “With soldiers and barbed wire and enforced flag-worshipping in the mainland, it looks more and more as though India is becoming an integral part of Kashmir” (35). For her, the tail is wagging the dog; fake outrage over Kashmir distracts the public from inept officials who refuse a proper accountability for the social ills they might address. Roy is nothing if not clear in her contempt for politicians on both sides: “And now we’re stuck,” she writes, with these two strutting, nuclear-armed roosters, who are trained to hate each other, who hold their minority populations hostage as they mimic each other in a competing horror show of majoritarianism and religious chauvinism. And they have Kashmir to fight over” (7).

All three writers suggest that a corrupt gang of the powerful in society, instead of molding together a nation that finds its strength in pluralism, pits one group against another. They seek to upset this status quo by inciting their readers to activism. Hamid estimates that his readers are ten percent of society, “people with a certain amount of affluence and education. . . . who dominate social media” (MIA, 160) but who care about themselves much more than they care about the 90 percent of “farmers, slum dwellers, domestic helpers and the hundreds of millions of Indians without proper healthcare, education and infrastructure.” The 10% “either shun them, or impose their new-found modern values on them” (160). “If we want people to change,” he writes, “we should not mock or deride. . . . [since] India’s poor are not a separate species from us” (161). Hamid, and indeed all three essayists, make a call for empathy from “us,” their ideal readers. Hamid writes:

If we can be silenced when it comes to Ahmadis, then we can be silenced when it comes to Shia, we can be silenced when it comes to women, we can be silenced when it comes to dress, we can be silenced when it comes to entertainment, and we can even be silenced with it comes to sitting by ourselves, alone in a room, afraid to think what we think. (145)

He sounds much like Martin Niemoeller, the Protestant pastor who spent years in a Nazi concentration camp and who wrote:

*First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Socialist.*

*Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Trade Unionist.*

*Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Jew.*

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

Simply sticking to one's well-laid schemes for becoming "filthy rich" is not enough, Hamid writes: one must look beyond one's narrowly-defined self-interests and identify with the filthy poor.

Arundhati Roy makes much the same argument against self-centered mammonism. India, she writes, is "too diverse, too grand, too feral, and—eventually, I hope—too democratic to be lobotomized into believing in one single idea, which is, ultimately, what globalization really is: Life Is Profit" (192). She wraps this attack on venality in a protest against fascistic notions of Indian nationalism, describing contemporary elections as "mock battles that serve only to further entrench unspeakable inequity" (117). Against Hindutva she argues that "[t]here's no such thing as an Authentic India or a Real Indian," she writes. "There is no Divine Committee that has the right to sanction one single, authorized version of what India is or should be" (62). Echoing Hamid's plea to embrace the masses in society who are not included in one's natural tribe, Roy rejects the easy manipulations of castes by politicians. "It's far easier to make a bomb than to educate 400 million people," she writes:

This is their land too, you know. They have the right to make an informed decision about its fate and, as far as I can tell, nobody has informed them about anything. . . . This is the real horror of India. The orbits of the powerful and the powerless spinning further and

further apart from each other, never intersecting, sharing nothing.
Not a language. Not even a country. (62-64)

Striking, here, is her barely-concealed disgust over the lack of maturity of her readers, and their preference for the “ease” of making bombs in place of the universally recognized difficulty of educating the Indian masses. Her real power, perhaps, is in the humility of the answers she offers to the ecological disasters that she describes throughout her essays: nothing so grandiose that it can be dismissed by her readers as idealistic pabulum. “The only way to combat it,” she writes, “is by fighting specific wars in specific ways” (176) - one step at a time.

All three writers condemn communalism of various sorts, and they pointedly underscore the needs of the disenfranchised in south Asian society. Chetan Bhagat identifies non-Hindus, gays and lesbians, and women as the oppressed of Indian society, and concludes that “how we treat these three minorities in the future will determine how awesome our nation becomes” (MIA, 118). Mohsin Hamid writes: “I believe that we co-create the overlapping societies we belong to, large and small, and that we should be free to try to invent new ways of being and interacting” (10). Roy’s identification of the oppressed is more pointed:

In 2015, in the state of Maharashtra alone, more than 3,200 farmers committed suicide. . . . We are a nation of nearly a billion people. In development terms we rank No. 138 out of the 175 countries listed in the UNDP’s Human Development Index. More than 400 million of our people are illiterate and live in absolute poverty, over 600 million lack even basic sanitation, and over 200 million have no safe drinking water. (29, 57)

She envisions

a sort of reverse engineering of the Hindutva project. . . an altogether different coalition of castes, one that is constituted from the ground up, instead of organized and administered from the top down: Dalit-Bahujanism instead of Brahminism. . . . A movement

that challenges patriarchy, capitalism, and imperialism, that dreams of a casteless, classless society. . . . A movement whose comrades would include those from the privileged castes who no longer want to claim their privileges. (22)

And so, when we ask what it is that young south Asia wants, perhaps the popularity of these three writers can suggest an answer. Perhaps their readers are ready to hear their challenging messages, or perhaps not: perhaps they read as voyeurs rather than as individuals who are ready to step beyond their narrow self-interests. After all, Bhagat, Hamid, and Roy analyze their readers through a rather critical unromantic lens, and if Bhagat sounds somewhat upbeat, Hamid and Roy are only modestly hopeful. The essays of these three diverse writers are calls to arms, and the three seem to have accepted that this call will be heard by only a small fraction of their readers. All three have apparently concluded that south Asia has long ago moved beyond a position from which a postcolonial attack on the British oppressor would be an adequate response to the region's various challenges. Their essays, in fact, are incitements to maturity, to honesty, and to compassion. They are calling on south Asian youth in the subcontinent and in the diaspora to. . . well, to make India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka *awesome* by assuming a public position of mutual respect for the *common* good. If not envisioning all this in a "postcolonial" context, therefore, one might say all three authors are attacking the *neo*-colonial state that successfully pits one element of society against another, and that thereby saps all the energy that might otherwise be turned against corrupt public officials and unjust social structures.

Bhagat records that he is addressing just 4% of Indian youth. Included within that small percentage, he sometimes specifically addresses the young Muslim community in India and, while acknowledging their oppressed status, recommends that they "take a leaf out of the book of other successful communities. The Jews in America and the Parsis and Sikhs in India. . . ." (154): they should, he recommends, emphasize education, assimilation (which, he says, means not voting for the Congress Party in lock-step), an acceptance of liberal values and personal liberties, and an encouragement of and rewarding of merit (155-156). Mohsin Hamid, less a populist than

Bhagat and less consciously focused on youth, is addressing the 10% of South Asians, principally Pakistanis, capable of shaping public policies through social media and legislative pressure. Arundhati Roy addresses liberal well-educated Indians, of whatever age, who retreat behind the unspoken privileges of an unacknowledged caste system. All three echo (with varying levels of volume and harmony) Frantz Fanon's invocation in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) to all colonized peoples to wake up and assume responsibility for their *common* futures—their common wealth.

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ⁱ *United Nations World Population Prospects*, the 2010 Revision. Available online at:

<http://esa.un.org/wpp/>

ⁱⁱ Far more typically postcolonial would be Audre Lorde's warning: "survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support." (110)

ⁱⁱⁱ How similar to the injunction of Audre Lorde to her female readers is this wish from Hamid for his countrymen-and-women.

^{iv} I have written elsewhere about the politics of an author's perceived audience. See Hawley 2003. For an interesting intervention in this discussion from A. Roy, see her "'The Ladies Have Feelings, So. . .'" in *The End of Imagination*, 177-193).